



'Manchester calling' For what?

Ian Parker

Manchester Metropolitan University

Manchester's 'northern quarter', an area targeted for regeneration – cheap hostels, clubs, old textile businesses and new cafe bars – was, on the Tuesday evening, rapidly shutting up shop. There had been rumours from late afternoon that Salford about a mile away had seen trouble, and restaurant owners round here were taking no chances. We took refuge in a Lebanese place off Oldham Street while the kids set off on their bikes to see what was happening a block or two south and reported back from time to time on events in Piccadilly gardens. An occasional flash of blue light, people sprinting from one alleyway to the other, stories of stones thrown, and all this in a growing atmosphere of tense, expectant, unusual silence. The trams and bus system closed down by mid-evening, music venues were told by the authorities to stop early, so by now there was a different mix; city centre workers and customers were moving out, anxious about how to get home, some locals were working their way down to the centre to see what was what, and small huddles of youth hung around the corners with nowhere to go. Everyone looked suspicious, looking suspiciously at each other, made objects of suspicion, and already separation was at work, division of each from the other, and no place in this for solidarity, just disorganisation and uncertainty about what would happen next.

This has been the edge of a collective response to the crisis, but not articulated as a demand for anything, not even as a protest that is directed at anything. It is, instead, a response that mirrors forms of power under capitalism, mirrors what we have seen in the past few years as the rich have been getting ever greedier and have taken ever more. The richest one percent have seen their incomes double, and the poorest who have paid for this are told that they must fight, one by one, to get anything. Trades unions and community organisations have been broken up as a condition for the formation of a 'big society' that consists of individuals set against each other. The message from the previous Labour government that simply repeated what they had been told by Thatcher, and is still repeated by Manchester City Council, that you must be an entrepreneur to succeed, and that this is the only way to succeed, is now sent back by those who break into the shops to take what is theirs.

This was a time for activity for some – some participants said they were sick of the police being in control for all of the year while this one day was a day for them – and passivity for most, most of the time, reduced to being spectators. Each outbreak of anger – protest at the banker's bonuses or call for the council to refuse to set a budget in compliance with government – has been pathologised and the lesson drummed home that you must do nothing except suggest what should be cut next. Businesses were boarded up after Tuesday night, but this is nothing compared to the cutbacks in social services, removal of benefits from those unable to work and desolation on the high street that has taken place since the crisis. Most of Manchester has been reduced to a level of passive acceptance of cuts in public services, and now this Tuesday night, while small groups fought back, took something back, most watched dumbfounded, their anger at their powerlessness channelled into anger at those seizing this opportunity to do something.

Manchester city, like Salford, like other urban centres, is packed with security cameras, and much has been made of how much could be seen as it took place, by spectators and by the state. These events are as much about who is visible, and how, as anything else. Most of the time Market Street and the Arndale shopping centre is heaving with consumers, and those with nothing are out of picture. Even if they come in to the centre from the poor estates, even if they are begging, it is if they do not exist, shut out of conscious awareness of those who can spend. And now, just for a moment, at even the same moment as hoods and masks conceal the identities of those involved, they deliberately and explicitly take the stage. They were on display, part of the show, but with nothing to say about the conditions that had led them to this; there is a bare statement about marginalisation and invisibility, and anger about what could be done with knowledge about who they are. It is then against this background that reporters would be seen as part of the police apparatus – Radio Manchester was obsessed with the burning of its car – and there would be attacks on those taking pictures on their mobile phones.

This was disorganised, but it was not 'irrational'. The fact that it happened so fast does not mean that it was somehow out of control (and the question is not whether the police bring order to the situation but what kind of order they re-impose). Any kind of collective activity evolves

at a very fast pace, and crowds provide a space to link action and experience that is very different from individual-isolated activity. Political solutions that forge different set of relationships as an alternative to frantic consumerism and passive spectatorship will only be developed through collective activity. The speed by which a collective defines itself, by which it decides who is part of it and who the enemy is, is a field of political struggle that is unpredictable, but as full of opportunities as well as dangers. This was not, for example, a 'race' riot, though the intervention of fascists into all of this after event will attempt to turn it in that direction. If anything, it was the segregation of the small groups from each other as they roamed through the warren of small streets around back Piccadilly that was the problem.

This was, in some senses, a protest, but in Manchester at least, unlike in some parts of London where there have been calls for police accountability and solidarity in communities who have organised to defend themselves, we have seen no collective sense of what is being done or why. And that has also meant that there has been no corrective reflexive activity to direct the energy of the protest against those who have caused the crisis, those who have directly benefitted from it, and no way to reign in opportunist criminal elements. Opportunism rather than strategy was in command here, as it is in the business sector and for politicians obedient to what the markets say. There is no side to take, to be in solidarity with here, but there is already in the days following the events, an intense demonization of those involved that must also be resisted. This is not only because every measure to increase police powers will be used against those who do organise against the cuts. It is also because this is a symptom of suffering, a symptom of crisis, in which, for all of its problems, a spark of anger, activity and visibility has appeared that will be absolutely crucial to any authentic future fightback.

Ian Parker
12 August 2011